

The Case for Integration in the Arabic-as-a-Foreign Language Classroom

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Introduction

Teaching Arabic means almost exclusively teaching the literary language, known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or *Fusha*. Many Arabic-as-a-foreign-language programs introduce a spoken Arabic dialect (Egyptian, Levantine, Moroccan, etc.) generally after the introduction of *Fusha* and in a separate track.¹ (For the sake of consistency and clarity, I will use the Arabic word *Fusha* to refer to the literary variety of the language and the abbreviation CV, short for colloquial variety, to refer to the spoken dialect.)

The goal of this paper is to present an “integrated” program, which I have been building at Cornell University since 1991, that combines *Fusha* and a CV in the same course of instruction. I will argue that it is more logical and more effective pedagogically than approaches followed in other Arabic programs. Before I present the program, however, I will list eight uncontroversial facts about the Arabic language situation, student goals, and a foreign language teaching principle that will inform my discussion.

Basic Facts

1. In the Arabic-speaking world, the CV is used for conversation; *Fusha* is not used for this purpose by any Arabic linguistic community, however small. Contrary to a widespread impression, even at conferences, informal conversation takes place in CV. While words, phrases, and complete sayings may be borrowed freely from *Fusha*, the basic structure is that of CV.
2. *Fusha* is used for reading, writing, and formal or scripted (as opposed to spontaneous) speech. It is true that the use of CV for reading and writing is increasing with the spread of the internet (chat rooms, text messaging, etc.), and it is also true that discussions and debates which take place at conferences, presentations, and TV channels like Al-Jazeera are often conducted in *Fusha*. The general pattern of interaction, however, is that described above.
(For a detailed account of the roles of *Fusha* and CV, the reader is referred to the classic study by Badawi [1973]. His conclusions about the sociolinguistic realities in Egypt are in the main still valid and can be generalized to other Arabic-speaking countries.)
3. *Fusha* has all the prestige in the Arabic linguistic scene because it is the language of literature and high culture, and is a symbol of Arab unity and a glorious past. It is also the language of the Qur’an and the studies associated with it. The colloquial varieties are stigmatized by the overwhelming majority of Arabs and considered corrupt, divisive, and even dirty.

4. Native speakers of Arabic acquire a CV naturally in the home as their mother tongue, and learn *Fusha* formally at school. Learning *Fusha* means learning to read and write it and studying its grammar.
5. Educated native speakers of Arabic move from *Fusha* to the colloquial and vice versa as a function of the linguistic situation or task. They read the newspaper in *Fusha*, but discuss what they read in CV. This is done subconsciously and effortlessly.
6. The Arabic dialects are mutually intelligible. Mutual intelligibility is possible because the bulk of vocabulary and grammatical structures are shared among them. In general, the percentage of shared features increases with education and geographical proximity.
7. While the main goal of Arabic-as-a-foreign-language students in the 1960s and 1970 centered around reading old Arabic texts, all indications are that these students want to learn Arabic now with the goal of functioning in it the same way learners of Spanish, German, Russian, etc., want to function in these languages, namely understand, speak, read and write the target language the way it is used for these functions by its native users (Belnap, 1987; Younes, 2006).
8. In preparing students to function in a foreign language, programs take the educated native speaker model as their goal.

The Integrated Program

The program introduces CV (in this case, educated Levantine Arabic) and *Fusha* simultaneously, integrating them in a way that reflects native usage. The educated native speaker is taken as the model. This native speaker masters and uses educated Levantine, not a regionalized form of it, which s/he uses for conversation at all levels, and masters and uses *Fusha* for reading, writing, and formal scripted speech.

Emphasis at the beginning of the program is on the familiar, concrete and informal, for which the colloquial is particularly appropriate. Reading and writing activities, in which *Fusha* is used, are also introduced in the first few hours, building on areas of overlap between the two language varieties such as numbers and names of people and places. *Fusha* occupies an increasingly more prominent role in the curriculum with the move towards the less familiar, less concrete and more formal, but integration remains an important feature of the whole program. An attempt is made to develop the four language skills simultaneously. Speaking activities are conducted in CV throughout the course, while reading and writing are conducted in *Fusha*. One lesson typically involves work on more than one language skill, which results in a continuous and spontaneous movement from *Fusha* to CV and vice versa as a function of the linguistic situation and the language material that are being replicated. Following common practice by native speakers, material presented in *Fusha* is discussed in CV, which contributes to the continuous movement between the two language varieties.

In discussing the different possible scenarios for teaching languages with diglossia, Ferguson (1971:73) raises the issue of language maintenance. He asks, "How can skill in one variety be maintained when the learning is concentrated on the other variety?" In the integrated program, maintenance would not be a problem since neither

side of the language is developed at the expense of the other or in its absence, but the two are developed equally and simultaneously.

The textbooks and supplementary teaching materials used in the program are selected and designed following the integrated philosophy. An example of a lesson taken from the intermediate-level textbook, currently under development, illustrates this point.

The lesson, whose theme is the weather, consists of listening, reading, speaking and writing activities designed to be covered in a five-day cycle (five classroom hours in addition to homework assignments). Following is a list of these activities:

Listening

- Weather forecast from Syrian TV – *Fusha*
- Song by Fairouz ('aquulu li-Tiflatii "I Tell my Child") – *Fusha*
- Song by Wa'il Kfuuri (Layl u-ra'd "Night and Thunder") – CV
- Conversation comparing the weather in three Arab countries (Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia) – CV

Reading

- Weather conditions in three major cities (Baghdad, Amman, New York) – *Fusha*
- Newspaper article about a snow storm in Syria – *Fusha*

Speaking

Discussion/debate about the weather (Do you prefer a cold or a hot climate? Do you like/dislike snow, rain, thunderstorms, etc.) – CV

Writing

Composition based on the discussion/debate in the speaking activity – *Fusha*

Why Integration Makes Sense: Pragmatic and Pedagogical Considerations

When two educated native speakers of Arabic, the models of the Arabic-as-a-foreign language program, interact linguistically, they typically use some forms that can be identified as *Fusha* and others that can be identified as CV. If we take a likely conversation about the weather as an example, pronouncing the word **تلج** as [talZ]² is a dialectal phenomenon, while **جوي منخفض** "low pressure area" is typically considered a *Fusha* expression. However, when these two speakers converse about the way certain weather conditions affect their trip to work that day they are likely to use both [talZ] and [munkhafaD jawwi] in the same conversation. One speaker might have read a report in the newspaper or on the internet, or heard the weather forecast on the radio and might share the information with the other speaker, using words and expressions he or she has read or heard. One of them might use the saying **بِاللهِ الاقوة ولا حول ولا قوة الا بالله**, "there is no power or strength except in Allah," which strictly follows the rules of *Fusha* syntax, as he curses the bump in the road. Are these two speakers speaking *Fusha* or CV? Except for Al-Jazeera-type interviews and scripted reports, which are almost exclusively conducted in *Fusha*, most verbal interaction in the Arab world is of this "mixed" type.

“Mixing,” of course, is not random, and native speakers master the sociolinguistic skill of using the appropriate form as they acquire the language, just as native speakers of all human languages do.

An Arabic program that introduces one variety only would introduce one set of forms, thus failing to prepare the learner in the other. A program that introduces the two separately would have to divide the forms into two categories for introduction in the two tracks. The numeral 8, for example, would be introduced in the *Fusha* class as *thamaaniya* or *thamaaniyatun* and in the CV class or textbook as *thamaanyi* or *tamaanyi*.

Segmentation becomes even more meaningless the further one considers its pedagogical implications. While it is possible to identify certain forms as being *Fusha* (جوي منخفض, particularly if pronounced with case endings) or CV (تلج for تلج), the bulk of the material used in the language is shared by the two varieties, and cannot in fact be identified as one or the other. In a list of words that are likely to be used in a discussion of the weather such as طقس “weather,” حر “heat, hot,” برد “cold,” مطر “rain,” ثلج “snow,” رعدية عاصفة “thunderstorm,” رملية عاصفة “sandstorm,” etc., which should be considered *Fusha* and which CV? Which of them should be included in the dialect course and which in the *Fusha* course? Even if one decided that *thalj* is the *Fusha* version and *talZ* is the CV version, would it make sense pedagogically to introduce the two words in two separate tracks?

The case for the one-track, integrated approach becomes even stronger when we take into consideration the fact that *Fusha* and CV, being varieties of the same language, share most of their linguistic features. An examination of the vocabulary of my introductory Arabic book, *Living Arabic* (Younes, 2007) confirms this fact. The cumulative glossary includes a total of 1,447 words and expressions. Of these, 99 words (6.8%) can be considered CV-only words and expressions such as *illi* “who, which,” *laHadd halla* “until now”; 86 words (5.9%) are *Fusha*-only words like *‘ayDan* “also” and *ghayr SaaliH* “not suitable”; and the remaining 1,262 (87.2%) are shared by the two — *‘alf* “thousand,” *baHr* “sea,” and *taHt* “under,” for example.

In the integrated program, the shared form is introduced once, with the context determining the pronunciation as a variant, in exactly the same way that a native speaker thinks of and treats that form.

Criticism of the Integrated Approach

Typically, two objections are raised against the integrated approach: the fear of confusing students, and the difficulty or cultural/political sensitivity of deciding which CV should be introduced in the program to the exclusion of others.

Confusion

The power of the “confusion argument” lies in its intuitive appeal: how can students be introduced to two (or more) forms of the same word or expression and be expected to keep them apart and use each in its proper context? Naturally, things should be made simple and clear to students. No teacher would want to confuse his/her students with different forms of the same word or two systems of negation. However, if we subject the confusion argument to a deeper examination, much of its

power disappears, particularly if set against the practices in the profession as a whole. The most common such practice followed in the overwhelming majority of Arabic programs is the use of *Fusha* for all language skills, including conversation, as evidenced by the three best known Arabic-as-a-foreign language textbooks used in North America over the past 40 years: *al-Kitab fii Ta'allum al'Arabiyya* by Brustad et. al., *Ahlan wa Sahlan* by Mahdi Alish, *Elementary Modern Standard Arabic* by Abboud, et al. In programs using these books, students are taught to say the wrong forms throughout the course. Although the word “confusion” might carry heavy negative connotations and might be in some cases an unavoidable consequence of the attempt to prepare students to deal effectively with the Arabic sociolinguistic realities, the practice of teaching *Fusha* for conversation can be viewed as consciously and deliberately teaching students to use the wrong forms in certain situations.

Another common practice that can potentially be more confusing to Arabic students than integration is the introduction of an activity in *Fusha* along with its translation in CV. As an illustration, in the “story” part of Lesson 2 of the first volume of *al-Kitab*, the most-widely used Arabic-as-a-foreign-language textbook today, students are taught to identify themselves and talk about family and work in *Fusha*. In the dialect part of the same lesson, they are taught to do the exact same thing in Egyptian Arabic. If I were an Arabic student, I would ask why I should learn both. If I can introduce myself in Egyptian Arabic, when am I supposed to use the other version? For the Egyptian speaker, *Fusha* and CV function to complement, not duplicate, each other.

To my knowledge, no programs exist where the two varieties are introduced separately while respecting the sociolinguistic realities of the language (i.e., using CV for conversation and *Fusha* for reading, writing, and formal scripted speech). Such programs would also fail to prepare their students to deal with the sociolinguistic realities of Arabic since they would not provide the opportunity for the development of the necessary skill of using each variety of the language in its proper context.

Potential confusion of some *Fusha* and CV forms by Arabic students can be viewed as less serious of a problem if considered in the wider context of a well-designed Arabic curriculum. Using appropriate forms in the right context is a skill that develops as mastery of the language develops, which is true of all foreign languages. Errors, whether linguistic or sociolinguistic, are expected at all levels of language learning, regardless of the approach followed. No approach can be considered error-free linguistically or sociolinguistically.

Confusion of *Fusha* and CV is minimized in the integrated program because of the way the two varieties are introduced in the classroom: *Fusha* materials are presented in the form of reading passages to be read and understood but not to be actively spoken. CV materials, on the other hand, are introduced and regularly used as a foundation for speaking activities. My experience shows that students develop a sense for the appropriate use of *Fusha* and CV at a surprisingly early stage in their learning of the language. For example, by the end of the first semester, or after 70 hours of classroom instruction, they are able to tell that *حامي* “hot” is used in speaking and *حار* in writing, so they write *حار* in their compositions and use *حامي* when conversing about the weather. Distinctions between forms acceptable only in writing and others

acceptable only in speaking are common to all languages. The concept and the practice are familiar and not unique to Arabic.

The “confusion” argument might well be the result of an exaggerated concern on the part of teachers to protect their students from being overwhelmed, while students are in fact more capable than their teachers think. If this is the case, then teachers would be doing their students a disservice by not preparing them for the sociolinguistic realities of Arabic while thinking they are helping them.

Which dialect?

The second criticism of the integrated approach can be phrased in the following way: Since there are numerous spoken varieties of Arabic, which one would you choose if you decided to introduce a dialect? It should be noted here that this question would be asked of any program that introduces a spoken variety whether in a separate track or integrated with *Fusha*.

This can be a difficult question, since it has political as well as economic implications. If Egyptian Arabic is chosen, then Egypt is given more recognition than other Arab countries, and Egyptian teachers will have a better chance of getting a job than their Tunisian counterparts, for example.

To start with, this issue should not be problematic for Arabic-as-a-foreign language programs in Arab countries. The choice of a dialect should be straightforward; students should be taught to speak the variety of the language spoken around them.

In programs outside of the Arab world, difficult decisions have to be made. But I believe that this is primarily an administrative, not a pedagogical issue. In terms of the needs of the students themselves, it should not matter which major dialect they master. A high level of proficiency in one Arabic dialect is sufficient for communication with speakers, especially educated speakers of other major dialects, as evidenced by students who master Egyptian Arabic and visit or live in the Levant or Iraq, and students who master Levantine and visit Egypt.³ On the other hand, students who have studied an Arabic dialect for one or two semesters cannot be expected to communicate easily with speakers of that dialect, let alone speakers of other dialects.

The CV used in the Cornell Arabic program can be described as educated Levantine Arabic. It is the variety used by educated speakers of the Levantine area (Jordan, Palestine/Israel, Syria, and Lebanon) when communicating with one another and with speakers of other varieties of Arabic. A main characteristic of this variety is the spontaneous suppression of regionalized features and forms which are not likely to be understood by speakers of other varieties and inclusion of more “standard” forms, such as the suppression of *baka* “to be” of Palestinian Arabic in favor of *kaan*, its educated Levantine counterpart. (A brief description of this variety is found in Younes, 2006:159-162.) It is the equivalent Level 3 (*‘aammiyyat al-Muthaqqafiin*) in Egyptian Arabic (Badawi, 1973:89)

(Educated) Levantine was chosen for the integrated program at Cornell for two main reasons. First, it is one of the major spoken varieties that is familiar to speakers of other Arabic varieties. Second, it is the variety that I am most familiar with, since it is my native variety and the one I have done research on. Over the past 19 years, teachers from Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait, Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia and

Morocco have taught in the program. In class, they used their own pronunciation of Levantine. Students noticed the different pronunciations but never complained about them. In fact, they generally thought that it was to their advantage to hear dialectal differences.

The teachers who spoke a variety other than Levantine have not found it difficult to teach and use for two reasons. First, the presence of a teacher- and student-friendly textbook has helped define their role and provide the “script” for that role. Second, the focus on the educated form of CV, which suppresses regionalisms and maximizes standard forms shared by other varieties, including words, expressions and sounds, shrinks the gap and eliminates many of the differences among them.

There were of course instances when teachers felt more comfortable using a high-frequency form found in their own CV but not in Levantine. For example, when an Egyptian teacher felt uncomfortable using *bididi* “I want,” he was encouraged to use *‘aayiz*, with which he was more comfortable, and to explain to the students that that is the form used by Egyptian speakers. It should be emphasized, however, that words like *‘aayiz* are a minority compared to the thousands of shared words.

Finally, I would like to point out that during this past academic year (2008-2009) the Arabic teaching staff at Cornell included two Palestinians, one Jordanian, one Iraqi, one Kuwaiti and one Sudanese. During our weekly meetings, the issues raised and discussed consistently and almost exclusively focused on teaching assignments, teaching techniques, *Fusha* grammar, testing, student absences and other administrative matters, and never on issues of dialectal differences that constituted a problem for the instructors or their students. This suggests to me that the “which dialect?” argument might be as weak or insignificant as the “confusion” argument when we get down to the actual business of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

It was pointed out in the introduction to this article that teaching Arabic as a foreign language means, for the most part, teaching *Fusha*. If a CV is offered, it is introduced in a separate track. Even when a CV variety is introduced, the focus is still on *Fusha* as the main course of instruction. Because of the focus on *Fusha*, the arrangement can be described as “separate and unequal.” There are, in my judgment, two reasons for this treatment of CV. The first is the stigmatized status of CV in contrast with the prestige that *Fusha* enjoys in Arab society. A clear indication of this prejudice is the way many Arabic teachers and curriculum developers refer to the two: *Fusha* is referred to as pure, high, beautiful and grammatically correct, while CV is often described as kitchen Arabic, street Arabic, slang, low, incomprehensible, a source of division, and so forth.

The second reason is that in the Arab world, teaching Arabic means teaching *Fusha*, since Arab school children already master a CV before starting school. It is understandable that for many Arabic teachers, particularly those trained in Arabic departments in the Arab world, teaching CV is a foreign concept. Another result of the exclusive teaching of *Fusha* in the Arab world is the abundance of instructional materials in it and the virtual absence of comparable CV materials.

It is clear that there has been a shift in the profession as a whole towards the inclusion of CV in the Arabic-as-a-foreign-language curriculum. This is evidenced by the increasing number of CV courses offered along with *Fusha* in many Arabic programs, even in the Arab world. The next step towards the habilitation of the colloquial varieties is their equal treatment with *Fusha* in Arabic-as-a-foreign-language programs.

All that is required to see how this equal treatment would work is to examine the way Arabic is actually used by native speakers.⁴ For them, *Fusha* and CV constitute one system of communication with two sides that complement each other. Each side is used in situations and for functions for which it is uniquely suited, and both are necessary for functioning in the full range of situations required for successful communication. Without one or the other, the proficiency of the Arabic speaker is incomplete. The language is treated as one indivisible system. Attempts at segmentation run counter to the very nature of the language.

Notes

- 1 The only exception to this generalization that I am aware of is the Arabic program at Western Michigan University, which is directed by Mustafa Mughazy. Students in that program are introduced exclusively to Egyptian Arabic in the first semester of their study before *Fusha* is introduced starting in the second semester (Mustafa Mughazy: personal communication).
- 2 Z represents the sound corresponding to the letter *g* in the French word *rouge*.
- 3 This is at least true of the eastern part of the Arab world, including Egypt and Sudan. I cannot make a judgment about the western part (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania). From my personal experience and observations, speakers of the western dialects automatically make adjustments when communicating with speakers from the east in terms of choosing vocabulary and structures familiar to them. So mastery of Egyptian or Levantine might be sufficient for the foreign learner to navigate his/her way in most areas of the Arab world.
- 4 It should be emphasized here that the educated native speaker is taken as a model.

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